

September 1, 2021

New Jersey Delegation
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

**Re: Funding in Budget Reconciliation for Removal of Lead Service Lines
and Low-Income Water Assistance**

Dear Members of the New Jersey Delegation:

The undersigned organizations from across New Jersey include local governments, public water and sewer utilities, community and environmental groups, racial and social justice organizations, and businesses.

We ask you to work with your colleagues, as infrastructure funding legislation moves through Congress, to appropriate \$45 billion for removal all of the nation's lead service lines, as well as significant new funding for low-income water bill assistance.

As you know, there are 9 to 12 million lead service lines nationally, including hundreds of thousands in New Jersey. Governor Murphy recently signed a law requiring all of these lead lines to be replaced within 10 years, but additional funding is urgently needed to implement that law. There is no safe level of lead exposure, and children are at particular risk from lead, which causes learning and behavioral problems, developmental delays and lifelong health problems.

Earlier this year, the House passed legislation to significantly increase water infrastructure funding, which includes the \$45 billion called for by President Biden to remove 100 percent of the nation's lead service lines. The Senate's bipartisan infrastructure bill would provide only \$15 billion for lead service line replacement, **so it is important that the reconciliation package include the remaining \$30 billion to ensure that no child in America will drink water from a lead service line in the future.**

Regarding low-income water assistance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress has provided \$1.1 billion in water and wastewater bill assistance for low-income households—including \$24 million for New Jerseyans. The emergency Low Income Home Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) marks the first time ever that Congress has appropriated federal funds for this purpose. These funds—which are administered by the Department of Health and Human Services and focused on paying overdue bills accumulated during the pandemic—provide a critical down-payment on meeting current and ongoing needs, but are far short of meeting the full need.

In New Jersey, ballpark estimates place residential water arrears at approximately \$100 million. That amount—which accounts only for drinking water, not wastewater bills—is more than four times the amount of New Jersey's current LIHWAP allocation. Detailed data from the electric and gas utility sectors indicate that low-income communities of color have disproportionately

high levels of utility debt related to the pandemic; there is every reason to expect the same is true for water debt.

A gubernatorial order currently protects New Jersey residents from water shutoffs due to unpaid bills, but that “grace period” is set to expire at the end of 2021. Outstanding water debt will not only place hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans at risk of water shutoff and tax liens, but leaves utilities with a budget hole that may be filled with future rate increases, absent financial relief.

Unfortunately, water affordability challenges in New Jersey pre-date COVID-19 and will outlast it as well. Jersey Water Works has estimated that, even before the pandemic, over 20% of households across the state may be struggling to afford their water and sewer service. Even with increased federal water infrastructure funding, local water and sewer rates will continue to rise to meet the full need for capital investment. The House recognized this in the INVEST in America Act, which authorizes not only over \$100 billion in water infrastructure funding, but also \$8 billion to create a new, permanent water assistance program at the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Senate’s bipartisan infrastructure deal includes no funding for water assistance to meet either immediate or long-term needs. **In the budget reconciliation process, we request that you work with your colleagues to include significant funds both to create a permanent water assistance program at EPA and to continue the emergency LIHWAP program at HHS, as a bridge until a permanent program is up and running.**

Robust funding for all of these programs is essential to ensuring affordable access to safe, clean water all New Jerseyans. We applaud your leadership on these issues and look forward to continuing to support your efforts.

Sincerely,

Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions
Jennifer Coffey
Executive Director

Atlantic County Utilities Authority
Richard Dovey
President

Black Human Rights Campaign
Munirah Bomani
Coordinator

Black Lives Matter Paterson
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